No. 20

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"You can do this," Alice paused as if reluctant to go on. "You can make love to me. I am sick and tired of being shoved aside," she went on bitterly. "I want to make my husband jealous."

R. of M. G., No. 20.

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SO FAR as Carlton McLain knew there was no one else who could have wished for the destruction of the play. Yes, she was the guilty one. There could be no doubt about that. With his face set in hard lines he muttered something that sounded like an oath.

"Too bad," Fillmore was saying. "But no doubt you have a carbon copy."

"I didn't have any carbon paper about," McLain began to explain as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "And it is a nuisance, anyway. You have to change two copies when you revise."

He spoke carefully, finding a certain calming effect in the commonplace words.

McLain wanted to be very calm. Then he told his listeners that after all it was of very small account.

"Vera did not want it," he said, "and I wrote it to fit her. There was no one else who could have done the part."

But secretly he was saying over and over again: "I'll get even with her for that. I'll get even with her if it is the last thing I do on earth."

There was fury on his face although he tried bravely to smile.

Presently Olive Bentley and Ruth Gordon arrived and were made welcome. McLain was slow to rise. He could not wholly trust his legs, so profoundly was he shaken. But when they stepped in his direction he rose to greet them.

A moment later he heard Guy Fillmore tell Ruth Gordon that his play had been burned, and the young girl swung to him with quick and generous sympathy. Her eyes were moist with tears.

He laughed and assured her that it was nothing.

"You needn't tell me that," she cried. "That play

was everything to you. You worked so hard. I don't see how you could be so careless. But there, you must feel worse about it than any of us."

He met her eyes and smiled a little. The girl seemed to guess at something unsaid, in this glance, and she asked eagerly: "What is it?"

"I'll tell you by and by," he answered lightly.

Carlton McLain noticed that young Fillmore had marked his intercourse with Ruth Gordon with jealous eyes, and he was amused.

The faint suggestion of a mutual secret thus created held him and Ruth Gordon together during the general light conversation that followed.

When Mrs. Galvin suggested a cooling drink, they all followed her into the house, Ruth Gordon keeping close to McLain's side.

Then Vera Browning came downstairs.

The playwright understood that she had come down at this juncture so that she might be at hand to watch the first meeting between her husband and Olive Bentley, with whom he had a love affair in France during the war.

She approached Carlton McLain with a bland smile.

"Mother has been raising a terrible rumpus about the hole burned in the table," she began. "It was really too bad that your manuscript should be destroyed through carelessness. But I know how you are feeling, Carlton. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"Are you really and truly sorry?" he asked narrowly.

"Indeed, I am." Then she laughed. "But, of course, I am glad such a damaging document is out of the way."

He could imagine that her eyes must have danced

just as they did now, the moment when she held a lighted match to one of the loose pages of his manuscript.

"You she-devil!" was his mental observation. "You damned she-devil. I'll fix you for that!"

A moment later Vera's husband, Dr. Daniel Pogue, came downstairs. When the actress heard his step she ran to meet him at the foot of the stairs, thrust her arm through his and turned to face the assemblage.

Olive Bentley and Ruth Gordon were standing beyond the mantel, and Vera led her husband toward them, watching Olive's face keenly.

McLain also watched, and he saw that the girl remained perfectly calm and collected. Not even by a flicker of her long eyelashes did she betray that there had ever been anything between her and Dr. Pogue.

The physician only showed the curious interest that might have been expected during the introduction which followed.

The four stood together for a moment, talking with some animation, then Dr. Pogue, in a matter-of fact way, directed his attention to Olive Bentley. At this point Guy Fillmore came up and quickly attached himself to Ruth Gordon.

Vera Browning, standing to one side, motioned to Carlton McLain. He joined her rather reluctantly. He could plainly see the disappointment in her narrow eyes.

Neither Olive Bentley nor Dr. Pogue had given a sign of previous acquaintanceship. The scene for which the actress and the playwright had been so eagerly waiting failed to have the kick they expected.

"Well, it fell flat," McLain grinned.

"I'll say it did," Miss Browning snorted. "I believe you have been stringing me. I don't believe my husband and Olive knew each other before."

"They did, I tell you," the playwright insisted.

"Then why didn't they show it?"

"Perhaps they have been in correspondence and knew that they were to be brought together in your house," McLain suggested. "You know when a woman falls in love with a man, knowing that he is married, she is apt to stoop to a lot of other things."

Vera's eyes flashed darkly.

"If I knew that, I'd scratch her eyes out!" she hissed, clutching at McLain's arm.

"Keep your head now," the latter warned. "No cheap theatricals. And what's more, quit kidding me. You are not in love with your husband and never were. To you he was simply the means to an end. For one thing, he is too old a man."

The actress stared at the speaker malevolently.

"You think you know a lot, don't you?" she sneered. "Is that why you made me such a despicable woman in that play?"

McLain shrugged his shoulders and walked over to the window.

During the next hour the groups detached themselves and more comfort was found on the cool veranda. Promptly at six dinner was announced.

The conversation in general was given over to the discussion of recent robberies committed by a daring burglar, whose hiding place and identity the police at Bar Harbor were unable to discover.

"We'll have to be on the lookout for this modern Raffles," Vera Browning exclaimed. "They say he specializes in women's finery and jewels such as rings, pearls and bracelets."

"I don't think it is a professional burglar at all," Guy Fillmore commented. "Very likely some rich woman's maid has done the pilfering. I am willing to bet that the thief lives right here among us."

"No, he doesn't," Carlton McLain broke in. "I have it from good authority that he lives somewhere else and that he comes here on a high-powered motor boat at night to ply his trade. And he goes well armed, too. He is the kind of a fellow who takes no chances. When he shoots he shoots to kill."

"You seem to know a great deal about him," Olive Bentley interposed

"Yes, indeed," spoke up Vera Browning maliciously. "Where did you get all the information? Perhaps you are the mysterious Mr. Raffles himself."

A laugh went around the table in which the playwright did not participate. His face had gone suddenly very white, and then the color rushed back to it until his cheeks were almost purple.

The actress addressed her press agent.

"Say, Guy," she cried, "wouldn't it be good press stuff if this burglar should visit me?"

Guy Fillmore nodded.

"Should I let him take what he wants?" she asked naively. "Or shoot him, or capture him, or what? What would make the best story?"

"Capture him by all means," the press agent advised.

Carlton McLain was no longer taking part in the conversation.

The careless and utterly unsympathetic comments on the destruction of his manuscript had left him bitterly angry. He sat slumped in his chair, his eyes brooding on the plate before him.

He was more and more convinced that Vera, afraid he would produce the play in spite of her, had taken advantage of his carelessness of leaving the manuscript lying on the library table. She had deliberately put a match to it.

His hatred of her grew by leaps and bounds. The contrast of the richness and the profusion of the dinner service and of his surroundings at this board with his own circumstances added to his bitterness.

But that was not all. Young Guy Fillmore had taken the lovely Ruth Gordon to the table and he seemed to own her.

From under his lowered eyebrows he fell to watching Vera Browning.

That woman was rolling in wealth and luxuries. She wore diamond rings worth thousands of dollars. The necklace of hers must have cost at least twenty thousand.

She had other jewelry in her boudoir she did not wear. And doubtlessly she always kept large amounts of ready cash concealed somewhere about the house.

Ah, why hadn't she played fair with him? He was suddenly brought out of his unpleasant reverie by a question from Fillmore directed at the actress.

"Where do you keep your jewels?" the latter wanted to know.

"In my boudoir, of course," she laughed.

"In a safe?"

"I have a wall safe, but I don't make use of it." Miss Browning laughed. "But I am not afraid of the burglar. If he ever has nerve enough to invade my room, I'll capture him, see if I don't."

Carlton McLain's lips curled in a sneer. A mad thought had just crossed his whirling brain.

He had been in Miss Browning's home often enough to know its detailed layout. He knew the way to her boudoir so well that he felt confident of finding it in the dark.

The thing could be accomplished this very night with ease. The moon would be out and he wouldn't even need a flashlight.

It would not be much trouble to gather up her jewels while she slept and disappear without making a noise. The more he thought about this, the more the idea appealed to him.

And why not? Vera Browning had wronged him deliberately. She owed him something.

He had vowed to get even with her, and this was his chance. And the best of it was—he would kill two birds with one stone. In punishing her thus he would get away from this damnable poverty.

Suddenly a burst of shrill laughter from Ruth Gordon startled him out of his abstraction.

He looked across the table at the young girl who sat between Dr. Pogue and Guy Fillmore. A few drinks seemed to have gone to her head. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were suffused.

"A reckless young female." McLain thought. "Ready for anything that is forbidden. What a joke it would be if I could persuade her to help me. I'll tell her it is only a lark to get a good joke on Miss Browning."

He knew more about this young Chicago miss than any of the people seated around the table suspected.

Had she not met him clandestinely upon several occasions and in spite of Olive Bentley's warnings? She was the kind of a girl, he felt, could be handled.

While he comtemplated her across the table, he scowled fiercely at Guy Fillmore. This young cub was getting entirely too intimate with Ruth. There must be an end to this—and the sooner the better.

He realized, however, that it would not be an easy matter to separate the young couple and keep them apart for any length of time. It became increasingly evident

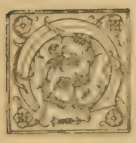
that Ruth and Fillmore thought a great deal of each other. And it was very true.

A keen student of human nature would, upon close observation, have discovered that a close bond of sympathetic understanding existed between Miss Gordon and Vera Browning's press agent.

But the playwright had his own ideas in the matter. He was quite sure that he knew enough about the young Chicago girl to give him some power over her.

Chapter 63

A DANGEROUS PLAN



ARLTON McLAIN'S plans for the immediate future, included a girl naturally given to romancing. She was impulsive and warm-hearted. Her many admirable traits hid the one glaring weakness—an utter lack of willpower. She fell easily into the moods of those about her, whether that mood was gay or sad.

And she also fell easily for gentle persuasion, particularly those flavored with a personal compliment or two. She was a flapper with a full-grown woman's instinct and knowledge.

Although Ruth Gordon had met quite a few men, and had come to grief because of one of them, she was a poor judge of the opposite sex. If a man dressed well, used good grammar and was polite in company, he must be a gentleman.

Immediately upon her arrival at Bar Harbor Carlton McLain had attracted her strangely.

No doubt the fact that she had been told that he was a great writer had something to do with this. She had a soft spot for artists, such as musicians, painters, and sculptors.

But to know a famous writer of fiction personally and be on terms of almost intimate friendship with him, was wonderful indeed.

Then the fact that McLain was staying at Bar Harbor for the purpose of writing a play for Vera Browning, an actress of national fame, had raised him to dizzy heights in her estimation.

She liked the man's personality. She enjoyed hearing him talk about his great ambitions, his travels, his successes and his disappointments.

The sound of his mellow voice thrilled her. Once he had kissed her as they met clandestinely at night, and Ruth, alone in her room, lay awake until nearly morning.

At the Browning dinner she was having the time of her young life. Every one present was gay to the point of recklessness. Even Dr. Daniel Pogue, usually grave and sedate, came out of his shell after a few cocktails.

Occasionally Ruth glanced toward McLain. Open admiration was in those glances, and pity, too.

He was bearing up bravely under the strain of having been deprived of the fruits of six long weeks of hard work. Expressions of sympathy for the total loss of his play he had waved aside with a smile.

Little did the young girl suspect that Carlton McLain was at that very moment laying secret plans involving her—plans, that were destined to end in a tragedy.

The playwright was waiting for an opportunity to draw Ruth Gordon apart from the others, to have her to himself for a while.

But she was now between Guy Fillmore and Dr. Pogue, and she was very full of gay laughter and animated talk.

A feeling of resentment stole over him. Young Fillmore was entirely too attentive to the girl. His eyes were constantly fixed on her sweet face. It was easy enough to see that he was in love with her.

But McLain assured himself that he could make Ruth forget all about Fillmore. He could dominate her when he chose.

She had, he knew a faint awe of his ability as a,

writer, and there was a strong degree of loyalty in her. And so planning what he meant to do, he thought now that he might play upon this feeling.

To get Ruth away from the crowd proved rather easy. A moment later they all rose from the table and someone suggested that they all go outside. They all began to move in the direction of the door.

The playwright saw the girl coming directly toward him, and he waited where he stood, smiling a little. Her fingers clutched his sleeve and clung there.

"Take me outside, won't you?" she whispered as she reeled slightly. "Olive Bentley is watching me and I am so dizzy. Those cocktails were too strong for me. If she guessed that I am tipsy, she'd lecture me to a frazzle."

McLain grinned his assent.

"We are going down to look at the ocean," he said, turning to the others. "Anybody want to come along?"

No one spoke, but Guy Fillmore's face grew dark as Ruth Gordon disappeared with McLain. He made a move as if to follow them, but Vera Browning detained him.

"I need you here," she told him with one of her engaging smiles.

In the meantime the girl and the playwright were sauntering toward the rocks abutting the ocean. It was a wonderful night. Ruth was chatting constantly while her companion listened more or less abstracted. Finally he interrupted her with:—

"Say, Ruth, you know, there is a nice chance for some fun."

He knew her well enough to be sure this remark would catch her interest. She was full of that hungry youth which is eternally desirous of a thrill, full of that restless eagerness for life.

She turned to him at once, eyes alert, and a question on her lips.

"I had the hunch to-night," he explained, "when they were talking about this romantic burglar gentleman who is busy around Bar Harbor."

"Do you think we might catch him?" she cried.

He shook his head.

"It takes professionals to catch professionals," he assured her. "That is why it amused me to hear Vera Browning talking about what she would do if the burglar should pay her a visit. She is so cocksure that no one could steal anything from her.

"I thought it would be good fun to come back here after they have all turned in, sneak in and get away with something just to have the laugh on her to-morrow."

Ruth Gordon gave an exclamation of delight.

"Wonderful! I think that would be thrilling. Can I come with you?"

McLain suppressed a gasp. He was almost ashamed of his easy victory. There was no need of coaxing or further explaining of reasons for his mad project. The girl offered to come unasked.

"Well," he drawled, "I thought you might want to."

"Oh, I'd love it," she declared. Her eyes clouded thoughtully. "But we would have to get into the house. How would you do that?"

"Easily," he told her. "We'll go back to the house in a little while and watch our chance. One of us will slip into the library and unlatch the window there. They won't notice. Then we can come any time during the night and climb in."

"I'll do that," Ruth offered eagerly. "I love being a conspirator. Now what shall we steal? What shall we burglarize?"

"Anything," McLain replied, "just to prove that we can."

"I tell you what," the girl exclaimed. "There is a wonderful oil painting in the reception room. We can steal that."

"Great," laughed McLain, and averted his face. "We'll keep the picture for a day or two and then return it. Won't that be fun? I bet Vera Browning will have the whole police force in her home as soon as she discovers her loss. She is so very fond of that oil painting."

"Alright, that's settled now." Ruth Gordon was just about to find a comfortable seat on the rocks when footsteps approached. "That's Guy Fillmore," she whispered to her companion.

"Damn——!" McLain swallowed the word, then added hastily: "Don't forget our agreement. Meet me at the landing at half past twelve. You can slip out without Olive Bentley knowing it, can't you?"

The girl assented with a confirmatory squeeze of his hand.

"I am sorry to disturb you," Fillmore said as he came up. "But Miss Bentley is not feeling so well and she wants to go home. She asked me to find you, Ruth."

"Very well," the latter replied a little disappointedly. "Let's go, Carlton."

The three went back to the Browning cottage in almost complete silence. It seemed that Olive Bentley's sudden desire to go home was breaking up the party. Everyone was leaving.

Ruth Gordon, true to her promise, found time to slip into the library. She unlatched the window quickly and came out smiling.

McLain saw her and a sign passed between them. The young girl's eyes were brilliant and her cheeks

were flushed. The smile she had given Carlton McLain spoke volumes. It seemed to say:

"I did exactly as you suggested. The window is unlatched, and we won't have the least trouble gaining entrance."

The playwright's heart filled with triumph. The plan which he had so cunningly devised was bound to be a success. There would be no poverty for him for some time to come.

Waiting until Vera Browning and Ruth had taken their departure, he bid a most pleasant good night to the hostess.

Very rapidly he walked away to complete the arrangements for the burglarizing of Vera Browning's home.

Chapter 64

MURDER

CARLTON McLAIN'S mental processes, in the hours since Vera Browning had so ruthlessly swept into the discard the fruit of his hard work, had been disorderly and tempestuous. He had been swept by gusts of anger, by tremors of dread and fear, by malice and self-pity and selfish greed.

His emotions had tortured and tormented him. But there was to be an end to that now. Within the next hour he would be compensated for all he had suffered because of her.

He had been sitting in a boat near the landing for several minutes. Presently he saw Ruth Gordon come down the rocky slope.

The moon was obscured, but it was light enough to see her dancing eyes. She had come in her bathing suit, which surprised him not a little.

"What's the idea?" he laughed. "Going to take a dip?"

"Not now," she laughed in return. "But we might have to later on. I came prepared for all emergencies. If we are caught burglarizing Vera's cottage, we'll probably have to make a run for it. I'll take to the water to avoid being caught."

"Why that is a capital idea," McLain exclaimed. "I'll run back and get into my bathing suit, too. You won't be afraid if I leave you alone for a few minutes, will you?"

Ruth Gordon shook her bobbed head.

"Not in the least, but hurry back, Carlton."

"We must not hurry too much," the latter declared. "We'll give the folk time to be soundly asleep before we enter that library window."

The playwright disappeared quickly and Ruth sat down on a rock to await his return. And while she waited she did considerable reflecting.

This thing they were about to do was not without its hazards. If they were caught there was no telling what the outcome might be.

Vera Browning always had a loaded gun handy. She was not the kind of a woman to hesitate in shooting if any of her belongings were threatened.

"I'll tell you something," she said to McLain when he hove into view, "I've a notion to back out. This didn't look like such a wild scheme after dinner, when I had a few drinks too many. Now I am afraid——"

"Don't be a quitter," he challenged gruffly.

"I am not a quitter," the girl retorted. "I am just coming to my senses. But if you are foolish enough to go ahead, I suppose I'll have to go with you."

"When I start a thing, I go through with it," he told her.

Ruth hugged herself nervously.

"Alright, let's go, then. I can't stand this waiting any longer. You go first and I'll follow."

Together they proceeded cautiously up the hill and along the line of shrubbery toward the farther end of the Browning cottage. Ruth saw that her companion was watching the windows.

A cloud had obscured the moon so that it was darker, and this darkness she welcomed as she would have welcomed a cloak in the chilly night air.

"Now," whispered McLain as they tip-toed up to the rear veranda, "we'll find out if they locked that window."

He put his fingers against the sash and pressed upward. It lifted an inch or so without a sound. Now, that the waiting was over, Ruth Gordon entered anew into the spirit of the thing.

She was exhilarated and afire. When the window was lifted to its highest point, McLain stepped aside.

"You go in first," he whispered. "You can move more quietly. I'll follow you."

She nodded her assent and leaned in through the window, feeling about with her hands.

The cushioned window seat below it made her silent entrance easy. McLain came right after her. He heard the faint chattering of her teeth.

"Are you scared?" he breathed into her ear.

"No, just terribly excited," she replied.

He took a hold of her hand and together they went forward with steps laborious and slow until they reached the door and stood in the hall.

The stairs above them seemed to leave them without shelter and exposed them to the view of anyone coming from the second floor.

From the hall they quickly passed into the big living room, and came to a stop under the oil painting previously selected.

"That is the picture," Ruth Gordon whispered. "Right over the mantel."

McLain gripped her arm and his lips sought her ear.

"Be still," he breathed. "I thought I heard a noise."

The girl began to shiver with fright.

"Oh, let us get through with this madness and get away, Carlton. I'll die if we are caught. I don't——"

A hand swiftly clapped over her mouth, left the last sentence unfinished.

Ruth found herself being led back to the library. It was a good thing that she could not see the desperate expression on her companion's face.

McLain was not excited nor afraid. A deadly calm had taken possession of him. This was his hour, and it must not be spoiled by the girl.

"You curl up on this window seat and wait," he told her. "Then if you have to, you can jump out of the window and run. I'll come and get you."

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"First I am going to find out what that noise was I heard," he told her. "And then I'll slip upstairs into Vera's boudoir. I'll get something from under her very nose—just to prove we can do it."

"For heaven's sake, don't," Ruth urged. "Let's gete the picture and go."

McLain shook his head stubbornly.

"You wait here ten minutes, Ruth. Now be a good pal and don't go back on me. Think of the fun we'll have to-morrow. Now don't be a quitter at this stage of the game."

"Alright, I'll be game," was her answer. "But don't stay any longer than ten minutes. If you do, you will probably find me gone."

The man nodded and slipped out into the hall. His face was now rigidly alert. His lips were drawn tightly across his teeth and his pulses were pounding.

A glimpse at his own countenance just now would have frightened him, so horrible did he look. But there was no turning back.

He moved very swiftly, making no sound. His bulky figure seemed like a shadow in the darkened house. He went up the stairs and in the upper hall stood for a long moment listening intently.

Then he swung about and glided to the door of the

room occupied by Dr. Daniel Pogue, Vera's husband.

When he tried the knob with a firm hand, the door swung open without a sound. The intruder's eyes sought the physician's professional bag.

It was standing beside the table. He lifted it on a chair and opened it. The bottles in the bag clinked very faintly together. McLain listened, alarmed, but Dr. Pogue, evidently soundly asleep, did not stir.

Presently McLain discovered the bottle he was after. It was labeled "Chloroform." He saw a roll of absorbent cotton and took that also.

Both of these articles he slipped into the front of his jersey swimming suit so that they rested against his body just above the belt.

As an afterthought, he shut the bag and returned it to its former position on the floor, then slipped into the hall and closed the door softly behind him.

After some careful maneuvering he managed to gain access to Vera Browning's bedchamber. She was asleep.

She slept on her back, a light coverlet drawn up to her bosom, one arm lying along her side with palm upturned, the other hand's fingers curled into the coverlet at her breast.

McLain could see her full bosom rise and fall with her steady breathing.

With the movements of a snake, McLain dropped on his knees and crawled toward the bed. His search for the hiding place in which the actress placed her jewels seemed to him to occupy an interminable time.

A swift glance around the bedroom had showed him that only a few pieces of furniture stood about.

When he could see the arrangement of the various objects he crossed over to the dressing table. He bent low to scrutinize its surface, running his hands, palms

down over each object.

There was a brush and a comb, a silver box, which when opened, revealed a manicuring sete, and a number of other inconsequential things. He had no use for them.

But there was a drawer that attracted his attention. With nervous haste he examined it and turned away disappointed.

There was absolutely nothing of real value in the dressing table.

Another table stood in the center of the room. The intruder felt confident that the things he craved could be found there. The top of it produced nothing.

The drawer was locked. With a muttered oath he forced it open. Again he was disappointed.

Then he turned his attention to a fancy oblong box which stood at the foot of the bed. Again his laborious search failed to reveal any jewels.

McLain had by this time become quite indifferent as to how fast the minutes were passing. He utterly forgot Ruth Gordon who waited for him downstairs in the library.

But even had he remembered that, it would not have made the least difference. The man was intoxicated with greed, drunk with the disappointments he had thus far encountered.

The perspiration was running down his face in a steady stream. He was not going to leave this room without satisfying the lust that had sent many a man to the penitentiary.

He was utterly ruined financially, and Vera Browning had done her share to bring this about.

He felt that he was justified in making her pay. The loss of some of her jewels would mean little to her. She was rich enough to replace them. If not, she had numerous ardent admirers who would.

As he glanced at her, sleeping so quietly, he fought back a sudden impulse to strangle her.

His fingers were itching to be about that slender white throat. But, he decided swiftly that murdering her was stark madness. He would be caught and then —the electric chair.

McLain shuddered.

He continued his search with fierce determination. But finally he concluded that they could not be in the woman's boudoir.

Only one single chance remained. The actress might conceivably have stowed her jewels under her pillow. The instant this thought came to him, he moved over to the bed.

His hand crept along the coverlet and came in touch with something hard.

To his amazement it was an automatic revolver. He quickly put the deadly weapon inside his jersey. The move brought his hand in touch with the bottle of chloroform already secreted there.

This was most emphatically the time to make use of the drug, for the sleeping woman had moved slightly.

The next instant he was pressing a large wad of absorbent cotton, saturated with chloroform, against her mouth and nostrils.

The struggle was feeble. Once or twice she shuddered convulsively, then lay perfectly still.

In his frenzied excitement McLain neglected to remove the cotton, and the chloroform continued to do its deadly work.

There was but one thought in his mind. Since Vera Browning had taken the precaution of keeping a loaded gun at her side, the coveted jewels must be hidden under her pillow.

For a rather long moment he stood in awed sil-

ence, then cursed his indecision. Why was he waiting? The woman could no longer interfere with him. She was drugged—helpless.

Bending over suddenly, he lifted her shoulders with a rough, confident gesture and drew the pillow aside.

As he did so her head fell back across his arm and the cotton pad dropped from her face. McLain's attention was caught by something curiously startling about her countenance thus revealed.

He bent lower and saw what it was that had startled him.

Vera Browning's eyes were wide open!

Yes, they were open wide. That alone would not have been so terrifying. The lids were parted, the white gleamed, and there was not a flicker. Eyes are not thus in sleep.

He tried to tell himself it was because she was drugged, yet he could not accept this explanation.

There was something starkly terrifying about the very limpness of the woman's body across his arm.

With a swift gesture of panic he drew down the coverlet and pressed his ears against her breast; tried to silence the clamor of his own heart so that he might hear the beating of hers.

But Carlton McLain could hear nothing. And after a moment it seemed to him that her body against his cheek was touched with a faint and deadly chill.

"Merciful God!" He dropped the limp form and stood erect. "I have killed her!"

It was true! Vera Browning, the beautiful and famed actress, the idol of New York theater fans, the darling of the rich, had slipped into the Great Beyond without a murmur of protest. She was dead — stone dead!

Like a dark shadow, McLain glided toward the door. For a moment he stood there, his breath whistling through his teeth.

Then, with a shake of his head, he approached the bed. Again he put his ear on the woman's breast and listened.

Somehow he could not bring himself to believe that he had actually killed Vera Browning with that chloroform. No—no, it could not be true!

But it was true—horribly true!

And then it flashed suddenly upon him that he had become a murderer.

Chapter 65

TREACHERY

ALICE GORDON'S mental attitude, so far as her husband was concerned, seemed to have undergone a complete change. Her conduct indicated that she was determined to worm herself back into his good graces. She no longer scowled at him across the table at meal times, nor did she antagonize him in everything he said and did as had been the habit with her.

She had a pleasant smile and a pleasant word for him every morning at breakfast, and at night before she retired to her boudoir, she insisted upon having a chat with him.

Her attitude toward her father, however, remained unchanged. She still regarded him as an unwelcome intruder.

She resented his obvious intimacy with her husband, and never missed an opportunity to let him feel that his presence at Oak Manor was no longer desired.

Old John Procter was very well aware of his daughter's keen dislike. That he remained was solely due to his son-in-law's efforts.

Between these two men a deep feeling of friendship and sympathetic understanding existed. Procter could not have loved Philip Gordon any better had he been his own son.

Phil's kindly treatment and utmost consideration made up for the frequent snubs at the hands of Alice.

The latter's repeated attempts to influence Philip against her father met with signal failure. Once or twice

she received a stern rebuke for her pains.

Finally she decided to drop the matter and went even so far as to include her father in table conversations.

Quite naturally Phil Gordon was puzzled at the sudden change in his wife. Ever since that morning when they met in the tower she gave him repeatedly to understand that she welcomed closer intimacy.

However, Gordon refused to come out of his shell. He held himself aloof and avoided being with Alice as much as possible.

Old John Procter watched the proceedings with interest. He seemed to sense that his daughter's change was not due to a feeling of remorse on her part. There was an ulterior motive behind it.

His mind was made up to warn Phil if the latter showed signs of weakening.

"She is up to some new deviltry," he said to his son-in-law one night as they sat smoking under a sheltering tree on the grounds. "This may sound a bit off color, coming from me, her own father," he added apologetically. "But, my boy, I know that girl better than you do.

"There isn't any good in her. The very fact that she is running around again with that Madison Country Club crowd is conclusive evidence of her utter lack of common sense and decency."

"But don't you think you are rather severe in your judgment, dad," the younger man protested mildly and with a smile.

"My boy," the old gentleman retorted irascibly. "I wish you had been less lenient with that daughter of mine. You always allowed her to have her own way in everything. You should have forbidden her to have anything to do with that crowd of social degenerates."

"Suppose I had objected, you know very well what the result would have been," Phil said morosely. "It would have given her another reason to quarrel with me. No, so long as Alice doesn't forget that she is a married woman, I shall not interfere."

John Procter snorted contemptuously. He replied:

"A girl who forgets the respect she owes her father, a mother who so utterly neglects her duties, and a woman who takes such fiendish delight in creating misery for others is apt to forget everything except the gratification of her whims. You can't tell what that damnable vanity of hers will lead to. Take my advice and stop Alice before it is too late."

Philip Gordon shook his head.

"It can't be done, dad," he returned. "You, who know her so well, ought to realize that. Besides, why worry? I don't think she would deliberately run into danger. Alice has an amazing amount of pride—if nothing else that is creditable."

"You are a fool!" the other snorted, and lapsed into stubborn silence.

At that very moment Alice was seated in her boudoir, writing a letter to Willard Parker, a well-known man-about-town in Chicago. But a well-known man is not always an honorable man. Some crooks and burglars were well known. Homebreakers, libertines and other social lepers are well-known men quite often.

Parker belonged to the latter species, and though still enjoying a degree of popularity in some quarters, every self-respecting man and woman gave him a wide berth.

That Alice Gordon should write to him had its reason. And a very good reason at that. The letter, when finished read as follows:

My Dear Willard:

No doubt you will be surprised to hear from me at this time. However, first of all, let me assure you that I am not numbered among your so-called friends, who delighted in your financial embarrassment. While you had plenty of money you surely were some spender.

I have not forgotten the great times we had together, and no matter what ugly things were said about you, I have remained loyal.

We all make mistakes. You spent your money foolishly and I rushed headlong into a marriage which proved an utter failure. I am told that you are about to leave Chicago and go West. Before you do that, I want you to spend a few weeks at Oak Manor, our summer home.

No, you are not the only invited guest, so don't worry on that score. There will be a number of others, most of them old and mutual friends.

But before you come, I must see you alone somewhere. Could you arrange to meet me at Walling's Tea Room this coming Monday at five in the afternoon? I hope you can. Call me up and tell me so.

Yours as of old, Alice.

That letter was sent the same night, and as might expected, proved to be a most pleasant surprise for the recipient. When a beautiful young married woman voluntarily agrees to meet an old admirer in a place like the Walling Tea Room, she takes the first step which leads to disaster.

The fact that Alice had a definite purpose in view which did not include the renewal of a previous intimacy with Willard Parker, does not excuse it.

But men like Parker are not in the habit of wasting their time on married woman unless certain privileges are granted.

The expected telephone call came and the details connected with the first meeting were arranged.

Alice blandly told her husband that she was going to Chicago on a shopping trip and that she would have dinner with Ethel Wynne, a friend of hers.

Phil, as usual, offered no objections. Alice had been in the habit of making frequent trips to the city.

He never worried about the time his wife returned because an inquiry in that direction would have been speedily resented and resulted in another quarrel.

In this instance, however, his indifference and silent acquiescence were nothing short of being tragic.

Willard Parker's reputation, particularly so far as women were concerned, was questionable. Like in so many other cases, his inherited wealth proved to be a curse rater than a blessing.

He had a glorious time spending it so long as it lasted. And when he went broke, he still possessed a few loyal friends.

Like a bee he buzzed in Chicago's society garden from one fair blossom to another. But he was not satisfied with sipping their sweetness. He destroyed wantonly, leaving disillusion and remorse in his wake.

He and Alice had been—what certain social sets are pleased to term "pals."

In such cases a young woman meets the young man on common ground, smokes with him, drinks with him, and stands for his shady jokes. As a matter of fact it is considered quite smart.

They openly ridicule married life and prate about their freedom. Which is all very well for the man.

The girl in question ends in having her morals corrupted and she often sacrifices her most priceless gift during an hour when her drink-befuddled brain refuses to realize the danger or count the cost.

When Alice Gordon entered the Walling Tea Room at the appointed time, the couples already seated at the tables were so absorbed in one another that they did not pay the least attention to her.

Every habitue of the place knows that a woman who comes there by herself, comes by previous arrangement with some man.

Restless, with uncertain little movements of anxiety, Mrs. Gordon sought the privacy of the room engaged for the meeting with Willard Parker.

For a few minutes she paced the floor, her eyes straying toward the door now and then. There was a smoldering fire in them and also an expression which told of a fixed purpose.

"Oh, why don't he come?" she muttered as she consulted her wristwatch impatiently.

The words had scarcely left her lips when the door swung open and Willard Parker entered. At sight of her he gave a gasp. This was not the Alice Procter he had known in the reckless days gone by.

This was a ravishingly lovely creature whose slender, yet well-formed figure reminded him somehow of Betty Blythe, the famous screen vamp.

"What is the matter?" she asked, confused at his prolonged silence.

"You — you almost frighten me, Alice," he confessed.

"Frighten you?" She laughed. "And why?"

"Because you—you are so sinfully beautiful," he

said, taking a deep breath. "My, but you look happy and prosperous."

"Happy?" Alice looked down swiftly, then up. In her eyes was an expression now that often came there, a look of secret longing as if they rested on something they could not reach. "If happiness could be bought with money, it would be mine, but it can't."

The man uttered a harsh laugh.

"Don't laugh like that," she cried. "I can't stand it now."

"Alright, then let's sit down, Alice," he retorted.

After they were seated, Willard Parker touched the bell and when the waiter came in with a cat's tread, he ordered tea for two. Occasionally he shot the woman a glance through the corners of his eyes.

Once more alone with the door closed, he leaned across the table.

"Now then, old girl," he began, "to what am I indebted for the pleasure of this unexpected meeting?"

"I think my letter explained that, Willard."

"Did it?" He raised his brows quizzically. "Perhaps it did and I have forgotten. I recall you said something about rushing into an unhappy marriage. Isn't your husband good to you?"

"Too good in material things," she responded. "But that does not always make for happiness. I have found out that this world holds pleasures money can not buy. However, let us not talk about that now. I heard that you intended to leave Chicago, so I made up my mind to have you at Oak Manor for a couple of weeks as my guest before you go."

Parker was studying the speaker keenly. He could not conceive that she had decided upon that without some ulterior motive.

Continued in next number

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